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FRANCE: POSSIBLE CUT BACK IN NUCLEAR POWER PROGRAM

Newly-elected French President Mitterrand may reduce emphasis on his country's domestic nuclear program, thereby jeopardizing its edge in world competition. Mitterrand wants to expose the domestic nuclear program

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to greater public discussion before deciding whether to modify the ambitious existing plans. He has supporters in the ecological movement, many of whom are pressing for cutbacks in reactor construction, and particularly for reconsideration of fast-breeder development. The new cabinet already has decided to abandon controversial plans for a reactor at Plogoff on the Atlantic coast, but Mitterrand himself is not opposed to nuclear power. He depends on the support of French labor unions, which would be opposed to the unemployment created by drastic cutbacks in construction. There will be no firm determination of government policy until after legislative elections on 7 and 14 June.

France has had the most ambitious nuclear power program in the world. At the end of 1980, it had 23 reactors producing electric power and 29 additional light-water power reactors under construction. Four new facilities, totaling 4,695 megawatts electrical, are scheduled to begin construction in 1981, and 14 more are in the planning stage. In 1983, the first commercial fast-breeder reactor (Superphenix-1) is scheduled to start up at Creys-Malville.

French nuclear efforts over the past 20 years were successfully advanced through intensive research programs under the Commissariat a l'Energie Atomique. Nuclear reactors and other related facilities were constructed by Framatome, Cogema, and other government supported or controlled companies, as well as by private industry. The former Giscard administration strongly supported construction at home, as well as foreign sales promotions.

Thus, when approaching foreign countries, the French were able to emphasize their rapidly increasing experience in the efficient construction and safe operation of modern light-water reactors, and the availability of engineers, designers, and technicians familiar with the most up-to-date innovations in

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nuclear reactor technology. They could also offer customers a reliable source of uranium enrichment services from the Eurodif gaseous diffusion plant, guaranteeing future fuel under less restrictive safeguards than required by the United States. In addition, they could offer reprocessing services for spent reactor fuel in their plant at La Hague, the only commercial reprocessing plant operating in the world. When combined with financial incentives and political efforts, such as former President Giscard's trip to Egypt, the French were formidable competitors. [redacted]

The French advantages have become especially apparent in the past few years, as domestic nuclear programs of competing countries (primarily West Germany and the United States) continue to stagnate for lack of orders, reactor licencing problems, and delays resulting from antinuclear activity. If France's domestic nuclear program is cut, its competitive edge will dwindle away as reactors currently under construction are completed and industry slows during the next five years. [redacted]

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